

I Claim:

1. A method of authorizing a user to operate a user-operated device, the method comprising:
- performing an authentication process to start an operating session;
  - detecting when the user is not operating the user-operated device;
  - suspending the operating session if the user has not operated the user-operated device for a first predetermined period;
  - continuing the operating session if the user performs an authentication-update process within a second predetermined time period after the operating session is suspended; and
  - continuing the operating session if the user performs the authentication process after the operating session is suspended and the second predetermined time period is exceeded.
2. The method of Claim 1 wherein the authentication process comprises:
- prompting the user to provide a login entry;
  - receiving a login entry from the user;
  - prompting the user to provide a password;
  - receiving a password from the user; and
  - verifying that the received login entry and password correspond to an authorized user.
3. The method of Claim 1 further comprising providing a prompt that the operating session has been suspended.
4. The method of Claim 3 wherein the prompt comprises displaying a plurality of icons.
5. The method of Claim 3 wherein the prompt comprises entering a screen saver mode.
6. The method of Claim 3 wherein the prompt comprises an audio signal.

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7. The method of Claim 1 wherein the authentication update process comprises inputting a predetermined signal to the user-operated device within the second predetermined time period.
8. The method of Claim 7 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises selecting a predetermined icon displayed by the user-operated device.
9. The method of Claim 7 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises selecting a predetermined character displayed by the user-operated device.
10. The method of Claim 7 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises placing a cursor at a predetermined coordinate on a display of the user-operated device.
11. The method of Claim 7 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises providing a predetermined audio voice signal to the user-operated device.
12. An apparatus for authorizing a user to operate a user-operated device, the apparatus comprising:
  - means for authenticating a user to start an operating session;
  - means for detecting when the user is not operating the user-operated device;
  - means for suspending the operating session if the user has not operated the user-operated device for a first predetermined period; and
  - means for updating authentication of the user and re-entering the operating session if the user updates authentication within a second predetermined time period.
13. The apparatus of Claim 12 wherein the means for authenticating comprises:
  - means for prompting the user to provide a login entry;
  - means for receiving a login entry from the user;
  - means for prompting the user to provide a password;
  - means for receiving a password from the user; and
  - means for verifying that the received login entry and password correspond to an authorized user.

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14. The apparatus of Claim 12 further comprising means for providing a prompt that the operating session has been suspended.
15. The apparatus of Claim 14 wherein the prompt comprises displaying a plurality of icons.
16. The apparatus of Claim 14 wherein the prompt comprises entering a screen saver mode.
17. The apparatus of Claim 14 wherein the prompt comprises an acoustic signal.
18. The apparatus of Claim 12 wherein the means for updating authentication comprises means for receiving a predetermined signal from the user of the user-operated device.
19. The apparatus of Claim 18 wherein the means for receiving a predetermined signal comprises means for selecting a predetermined icon displayed by the user-operated device.
20. The apparatus of Claim 18 wherein the means for receiving a predetermined signal comprises means for selecting a predetermined character displayed by the user-operated device.
21. The apparatus of Claim 18 wherein the means for receiving a predetermined signal comprises means for placing a cursor at a predetermined coordinate on a display of the user-operated device.
22. The apparatus of Claim 18 wherein the means for receiving a predetermined signal comprises means for receiving a predetermined voice signal from the user of the user-operated device.
23. A device that is operable by a user during an operating session, the device comprising:  
a user interface configured to provide user-understandable signals and to receive signals from the user; and

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a control unit coupled to the user interface, wherein the control unit is configured to:

perform an authentication process with the user, the authentication process determining whether a user attempting to operate the device is an authorized user, wherein an operating session is started if the control unit determines that the user is an authorized user, the device entering an authenticated mode,

measure elapsed time from when the user last operated the device when the device is in the authenticated mode, the elapsed time being reset each time the user operates the device while the device is in the authenticated mode,

suspend the authenticated operating session if the elapsed time measured by the user reaches a first predetermined value, the device entering a suspended mode,

perform an authentication-update process with the user, the authentication-update process determining whether the user is an authorized user, wherein the device re-enters the authenticated mode to continue the operating session if the user completes the authentication-update process before the elapsed time reaches a second predetermined value, and

if the elapsed time exceeds the second predetermined time period, perform the authentication process with the user before re-entering the authenticated mode to continue the operating session.

24. The device of Claim 23 wherein the authentication process comprises:  
prompting the user to provide a login entry;  
receiving a login entry from the user;  
prompting the user to provide a password;  
receiving a password from the user; and  
verifying that the received login entry and password correspond to an authorized user.

25. The device of Claim 23 wherein the device is further configured to provide a prompt when the device enters the suspended mode.

26. The device of Claim 25 wherein the prompt comprises displaying a plurality of icons.
27. The device of Claim 25 wherein the prompt comprises entering a screen saver mode.
28. The device of Claim 25 wherein the prompt comprises an audio signal.
29. The device of Claim 23 wherein the authentication-update process comprises the user inputting a predetermined signal to the device through the user-interface within the second predetermined time period.
30. The device of Claim 29 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises selecting a predetermined icon displayed by the device through the user-interface.
31. The device of Claim 29 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises selecting a predetermined character displayed by the device through the user-interface.
32. The device of Claim 29 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises placing a cursor at a predetermined coordinate on a display, the display being part of the user-interface.
33. The device of Claim 29 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises providing a predetermined audio voice signal to the device through the user-interface.
34. The device of Claim 29 wherein inputting a predetermined signal comprises the user looking at a predetermined character at a location displayed on the user-interface, the user interface being configured to determine the location on the user-interface at which the user is looking.